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Le Prince Research Project: Searching the Archivo General de las Indias

By James Spirek

In October 2000, I was awarded an Archaeological Research Trust (ART) grant of \$2,000.00 to search for *Le Prince* related documents and other materials about French corsairs at the Archivo General de las Indias (AGI) in Seville, Spain. I

hired Claudio Bonifacio, an experienced researcher of the AGI and a resident of Seville, to conduct the research. Bonifacio spent approximately three weeks in the archives looking at 39 bundles of paper and digitized documents searching for information on the incidents surrounding the corsair's voyage, shipwreck, and fate of the crew. Sorting through papers bound in bundles and scrolling down the computer screen, Bonifacio found several documents mentioning *Le Prince*, or as it was alternately known by the Spaniards as *La Princesa* or *El Principe*. He also found an abundance of materials related to contemporary French corsair activities in the

New World. The illustrations show a couple of the documents that Bonifacio had photocopied for us that exhibit the passage of time and some very nice handwriting to make the translations go easier (See figures

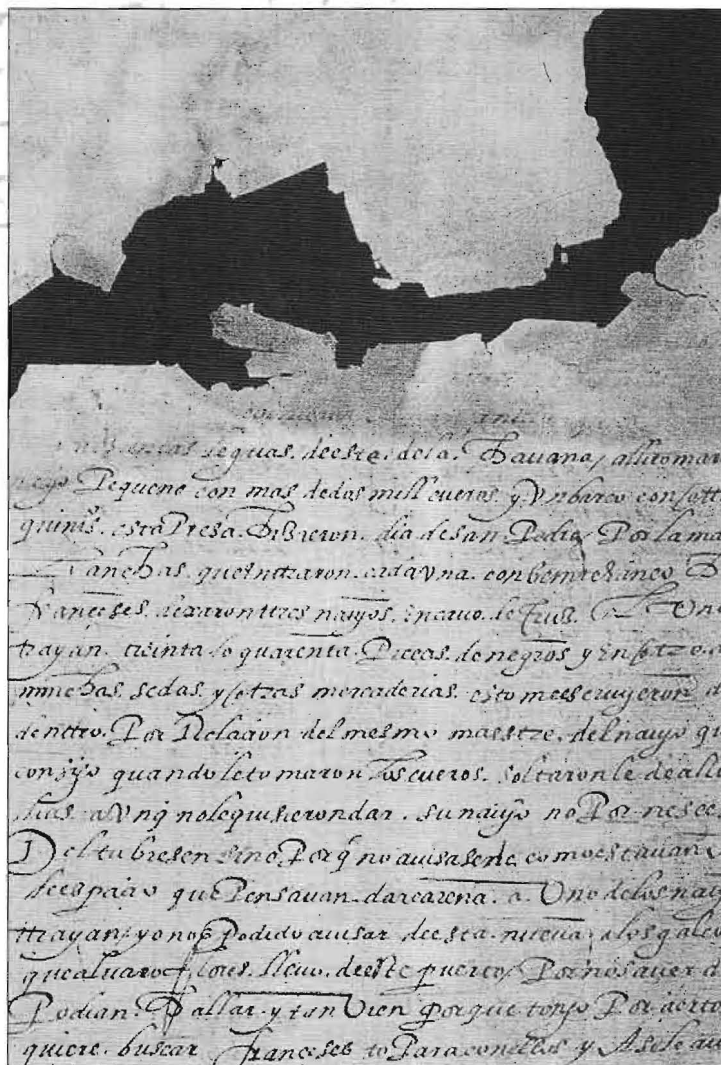
1 and 2).

The newly found *Le Prince* documents cover the period when the corsair entered the waters off Hispaniola Island (present day Dominican Republic and Haiti) to

French ships in an attempt to take a Spanish ship during a bombardment of Santiago de Cuba, on the southern coast of Cuba. The same letter mentions *Le Prince* as taking on a quantity of foodstuffs in which the

crew was in need of, namely lard, corn, and water. Another document relating the voyage of Cristobal de Erasso, the captain-general of the Indies fleet in 1576, mentions his encounters with several French corsairs, including *Le Prince*.

Bonifacio also located several documents previously translated by Jennette T. Connor in her two-volume work, *Colonial Records of Spanish Florida: Letters and Reports of Governors and Secular Persons*, which reveal the circumstances surrounding the shipwreck survivor's battles with the Indians and Spaniards in the vicinity of Santa Elena, and for the majority that survived these conflicts, their final demise at the end of a rope. Another new document mentions in more detail the

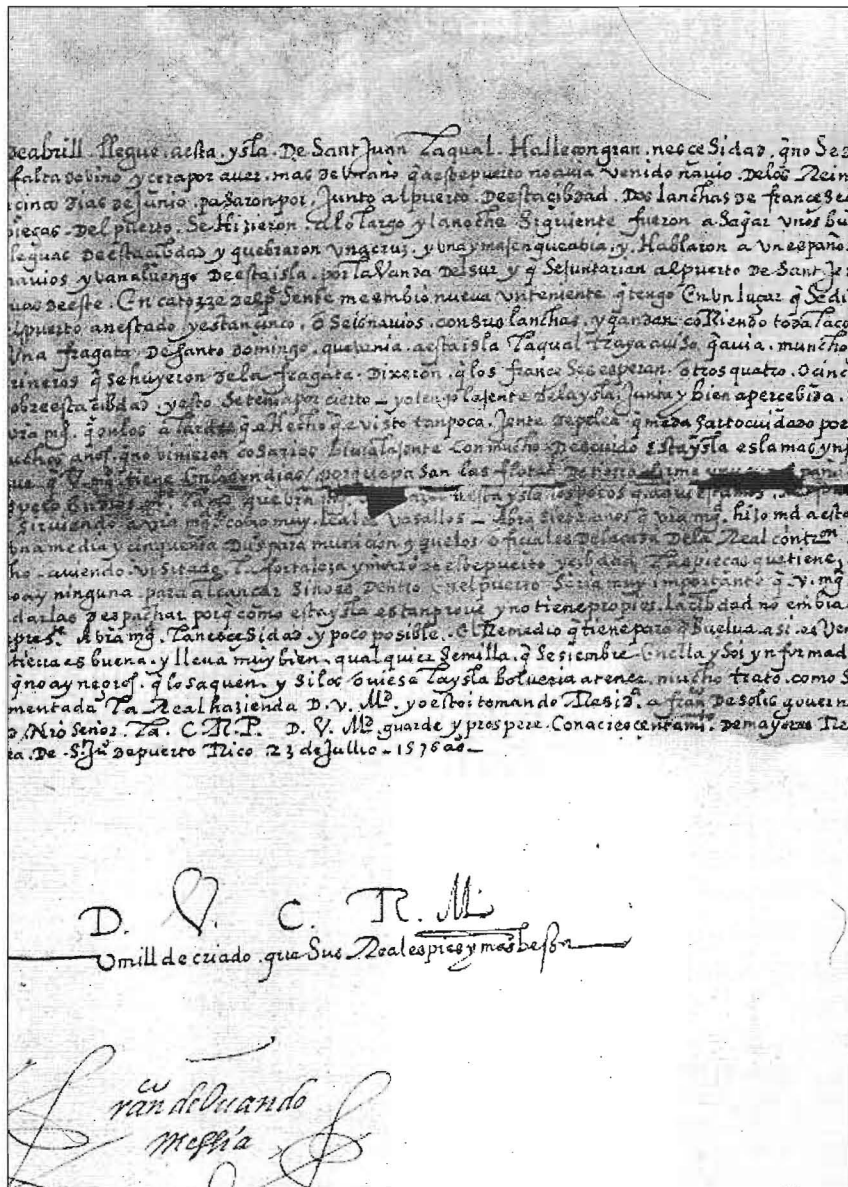


Spanish documents found in the archives in Seville, Spain. (SCIAA photo)

after the wreck in Port Royal Sound. The documents generally consist of correspondence from a Crown official to the king of Spain, Philip II. The governor of Cuba wrote that the corsair was in company with other

fate of Captain Le Rocque, who was brought to the Spaniards by Indians living in the Appalachians.

Other documents mention French depredations along the Venezuela coast at the pearling island of



Spanish documents found in the archives in Seville, Spain. (SCIAA photo)

Margarita and the hide producing area of Cumaná on the mainland. Another couple of documents report the sacking of Guadianilla, a town on the island of Puerto Rico. While these several documents do not specifically mention *Le Prince*, the dates when these letters were written correspond to the time the ship was in the area. We are currently developing a timeline of the corsair's voyage to determine if these letters refer to the actions of *Le Prince*. These documents have been photocopied, and we hope to have some of

the pertinent areas of the documents translated. Each of these documents should help to shed more light on the story of *Le Prince's* ill-fated voyage of 1576.

A number of other documents found in the bundles Bonifacio consulted included numerous references to French corsair activity in the Caribbean. These materials should prove useful in developing a historical context for the corsair. They will also help to reveal the more human side of the story, especially one letter, which mentions the fear of

traveling in areas infested with French corsairs.

In our effort to locate *Le Prince* and numerous other wrecks as part of the ongoing Port Royal Sound Survey, the Underwater Archaeology Division has just completed four weeks of remote sensing operations in March and April 2001. We concentrated our survey at the entrance to the sound based on historical research that suggests the corsair wrecked in this vicinity, along with over 50 other unfortunate ships. A more detailed report of our survey and preliminary results will appear in the next *Legacy*. I would like to express my thanks to the Board of Trustees of the Archaeological Research Trust for providing the funds to search for documents in Spain and for their continued support of this research project. If you would like to help in our efforts, please consider sending a tax-deductible contribution to the Archaeological Research Trust Fund earmarked for the Port Royal Sound Survey.

EMILY STOUT JOINS STAFF AS INTERN

By Lynn Harris

Emily Strout, a senior Anthropology major at the College of Charleston, has joined the Sport Diver Archaeology Management Program as an intern for the spring semester. She has been PADI Open water certified for three years and has been diving in the Florida Keys and off the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. Emily has taken an interest in the Caribbean connection with South Carolina and the maritime practices in the Caribbean. Upon graduation in May 2001 she plans to further her studies in graduate school for underwater archaeology.

The intern program between the College of Charleston and the Sport Diver Archaeology Management Program, a part of SCIAA's Underwater Archaeology Division headed by Lynn Harris, was established in 1992.